

## Nightmares and Shattered Illusions by DeathByVerbicide

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**Summary:**

Stranger Things AU: While mourning the death of his brother, Cisco accidentally opens a breach to a dimension he's never visited before - one filled with darkness, demons, and despair. Cynco/Charmvibe. Please read and review!

# 1. Chapter 1

See, Cisco actually loved his powers, because they helped him get away from it all.

No, literally.

When the stress would get too high and the pressure became suffocating, or when the day had been too long and a simple night of sleep wouldn't be enough to rejuvenate himself, Cisco resorted to his powers as a means to relax.

Night after night and usually after Team Flash missions, he'd cut to his room, close the door, and hold up his hand, sending vibrating pulses through the interdimensional barrier - and explore.

He started off small, first traveling to countries and cities on his own earth, exploring and hanging out in new cultures like his very own Indiana Jones, before he finally grew enough confidence in himself to get adventurous and start breaching to other dimensions, starting with Earth-2.

Gorgeous golden skyscrapers against a pale painted sky, and the huge monorail that cut through Central, Earth-2 was a glamorous mix of 20th century style and 22nd century technology.

Cisco went around, smiling and making small talk with the locals. They lived very different lives from those on Earth Prime, more peaceful and relaxing now that Hunter Zolomon was no longer terrorizing their world.

Cisco never really went to visit Harry, but it was definitely nice to be able to catch up with Detective Iris West-Allen and the innocent dork she'd been wedded to for a husband.

The duo always had amazing stories to tell, about their lives and the kind of crimes they'd be running into. Detective West-Allen was expecting twins, the couple told Cisco with glee, and they were planning on naming the children Dawn and Donovan, names Iris's father had picked out before he had passed away. Detective West-

Allen's and Dr. Allen's latest criminal was a thief who went after ice cream. Bartholomew had named him the "Raspberry Rough-Houser" - and Cisco had chuckled calmly and corrected him, coining his title as "Raspberry *Raider*" instead.

And despite incoming baby twins and ice cream robberies and all, Iris and Bartholomew always widened their eyes in shock when Cisco told them his stories.

Barry running back in time, creating Flashpoint. Iris, having a brother who was also a speedster. The alien attack. The new oddball, Harrison Wells. Sentient gorillas.

How Dante had died...

Cisco reluctantly broke down, covering his face with his hands, and the other Barry put his hand on Cisco's shoulder.

His brother's death.

*Dante.*

That was the reason why he was hopping through breaches.

Cisco may have forgiven his earth's Barry, but he wasn't done grieving.

He would *never* be done grieving.

An entire side of his life had been torn out by Barry's impulsive actions. He'd seen and dealt with death and loneliness before, but Dante's demise was a fresh wound that would always bleed.

He missed his brother, and it was a pain that could never leave him, a pain that would constantly torment him with heartaches and regret - and Cisco sought to distract himself by breaking the space-time barrier and keeping himself busy.

Cisco continued jumping through breaches, enjoying the peace of his own companionship, discovering new worlds. Earth 47 was submerged entirely underwater. Beautiful fish, exotic corals, endless blue depth - and murderous mermaids. Earth 12 was inhabited by

roses the sizes of buildings, and small, delicate people with giant, fragile wings, and glowing eyes. A fairy earth, Cisco realized in awe. Earth-21 had nothing but technology, and giant robots walked and ruled over the planet. This earth *had* to be Cybertron in real life.

Back on Earth-38, Kara Danvers squealed with delight and gave Cisco a bone-crunching hug when he popped into Catco out of the blue, introducing him to Winn and James as her good friend from Earth Prime. They'd gotten ice cream together, and caught up on old times. Cisco learned Kara was struggling with her new boyfriend - an alien Daxamite, and that she'd gotten into an argument with James, and that there was new Luthor in town whom many were believing to be untrustworthy. Her father was still missing, and trouble always seemed to be afoot. Cisco put his hand over hers and promised her that if she should ever need help, he would never turn her down. It's why he had given her the breaching device, hadn't he?

Cisco vibed over to Earth-3, and Jay Garrick smiled warmly and invited him over for dinner with himself and his wife Joan.

Cisco even discovered another versions of his own Earth - one where the particle accelerator hadn't blown, and Barry was still geeky, and Caitlin had been happily married to Ronnie, the original Wells a happy, loving and successful scientist alongside his wife, Tess, there were other scientists at the lab whom Cisco had befriended - and at night, Dante still came home from concerts, snickering with a wide, familiar smile as he picked on his younger *hermano*.

No, Cisco left that earth immediately.

At any rate, he was back on Earth Prime, helping his team through another mission. Or rather, the Team was helping him. Someone was here for H.R., and Cisco had just volunteered to fight her for his sort-of friend's safety.

Cynthia Reynolds.

Bounty hunter from Earth-19. Small but unbelievably nimble and strong, with eyes as dark as smoke and twice as entrancing, and dark, wild curls folded down one shoulder.

If beauty could kill, Earth-19 was right to choose her as their huntress.

"A fight to the death," Julian snickered grimly, removing his gloves at the desk in the Speed Lab. "You just had to offer yourself for this, didn't you?"

"Well, I couldn't just leave H.R. to die now, could I?" Cisco mimicked sarcastically, watching his hands as he flexed his fingers. He had little to no hand-to-hand combat skills. His only true skill against her were his breaches and the vibe blasts, and he was getting pretty damn good at those, compared to how he was when his powers had first started manifesting.

But Cynthia was a master at this. She hunted down breachers for a living. Opening portals to other earths, throwing vibe blasts, capturing and defeating her opponents - those were her callings. She was unmatched in her skills.

Cisco traveled to other worlds as a means of escape and coping, not to fight. And he was lucky if he could vibe very far without getting those annoyingly jarring headaches.

"Are you worried you'll lose?" H.R. asked, trying to be helpful. He got down on his haunches and sat in front of Cisco, placing a hand on Cisco's shoulder, "Franchesco, she... she doesn't stand a chance against you. You've got what it takes to best her."

"Thanks for nothing, H.R.," Cisco replied coarsely, still studying his hands.

"I - I know I got you into this mess, and you don't have to do this," H.R. stammered, his expression saddening, "But I truly, and genuinely, and honestly, appreciate you going out and offering to fight Gypsy for me."

"Gypsy's a slur, so *again*, thanks for nothing," Cisco announced with a scowl, getting up, "And I'm not going to call her that."

"So what do you propose we call her, then?" Caitlin questioned quietly, working beside Julian on a device that they hoped would

help in the situation.

"I don't know..." Cisco began, facing her in confusion. He lifted a hand to scratch his hair before he spoke again. "I was thinking... maybe, Charmer would sound nice for her..."

"Charmer?" Julian repeated skeptically, his brow arched high, "Why? Because you find her *charming*?"

"Cisco, I don't really think you can afford to, you know, be flirty with her," Caitlin advised quietly.

Cisco frowned. "Make what you want out of it - I'm not calling her the other name. Anyone know where Barry's at? Or the rest of the team, for that matter?"

Everyone's eyes fell to the ground. "He's... he's with Iris right now. Joe was needed at the precinct, and Wally's at school."

"Alright," Cisco sighed, turning to leave, "If anyone needs me, I'll be at my place. I need a little rest."

"What?" Julian queried incredulously, "Cisco, you only have 16 hours left. You still need to practice your skills, lest you-"

"No, let him go," Caitlin interjected kindly, nodding at Cisco, "You've been training nonstop. That training won't be any good for you if you're tired when Gyp- *Charmer* gets here. We'll see you in a bit."

Julian and H.R. both coughed up farewells, and Cisco left STAR Labs.

So that was it, he thought.

Julian pretty much believed Cisco was going to die, Caitlin was still reaching out for some hope that he wouldn't, and H.R. was still useless.

And Cisco had no idea what was going on in Barry's brain at all.

He urged himself to put his thoughts away, but the second he got home, he broke down, collapsed on his knees.

This was too much.

Too much for any one man, even with a team backing him.

Cisco wasn't a weapon.

He couldn't fight - he couldn't hurt other people. His powers were still developing, and he'd never used them in intense battle before - and he doubted he could face off against an intergalactic warrior with unrivaled skill.

Sad thoughts filled Cisco's mind.

Would the team even miss him, if she won?

What would they say in the papers? What would become of his parents?

Would they lay him down next to his brother?

No, Cisco opened up his hand and held it so it was facing away from him. He needed to take a break. He needed to go visit a calming earth. If he didn't return in time, Charmer would hunt him down and order him to fight, or maybe she would just kill H.R. before she'd return home a valiant hero.

Maybe Cisco could open up a breach to Earth 19, and try to talk to the counsel there.

He put on his Vibe goggles, closed his eyes and breathed slowly, until he felt that cool, familiar energy cutting through his body, leaving his palm in the form of tingly warmth and sharp sting of raw power in his fingers.

But this breach felt different.

Cisco hadn't opened a portal, like he had been used to.

This...

This portal had been cut into the air. This was no pathway that opened to another world - this was a stab wound in the fabric of the

interdimensional universe. A gut feeling warned Cisco to close the opening immediately, that he'd done something wrong.

Cisco quickly removed his goggles, and found himself looking at a gaping hole against the wall in his room. Smoke, and a strong rancor of blood bloomed through the air, and the breach was edged with sticky, black webbing, pulsating as if it was alive.

Breaches were not supposed to be alive.

Intense terror filled Cisco's heart as he tried to control whatever adrenaline fledged through him, twisting inside his stomach and lifted his hand again to try and seal this opening - this entrance, to no avail.

Then his heart skipped a beat - and the opening beckoned him forward. A strange, but sweet signal that tingled Cisco's sixth sense, inviting him into the black, beating webs. Summoning him.

There was something behind the breach calling him. It was hard to explain - but there was something about the taste of energy...

Dark.

Cool.

Soothing.

Quiet, and peaceful.

If he needed to rest, this dimension was the place, the breach seemed to coax.

But at the same time, fear hung in the air like a subtle warning.

Cisco held his breath as he slowly took a step forward - but when he put his hand to the thin, wet web, it grasped him like an inescapable tangle of ivy, and a hot scream pierced the air.

*"Ciscooo!"* a muffled male voice shrieked in pain from within the breach, piercing the quiet air of the room, *"Cisco - please!"*



"D - Dante?!" Cisco gasped, his forehead quickly beading with sweat, his heart beating faster than ever before, "*Dante!* What-"

"*Cisco - Cisco, it's chasing me!*" Dante's muffled voice screamed, "*Cisco - please!* "

"Dante! I'm coming!" Cisco shouted back, wrestling his arm loose from the black ivy, and forcing his way through the breach - the entrance - whatever it was.

More ivy-like webbing caught at his torso, thorns jutting into his neck, wrapping tightly around his legs, threatening to crush him, strangle him - but Cisco fought it desperately.

That was *Dante*.

Dante - he was alive, and he was trapped in this new realm - and he was in trouble and needed for Cisco to come find him.

Cisco tore and beat at the leathery wisps that were tying onto him - pushed through and fell to the ground, gasping for air.

Air - there was no air here. *Breathe*. Hopeless burning in his throat. *Breathe - don't die*. Cisco couldn't see, he couldn't breathe. *Don't die - Dante. Find Dante.* - and he gulped despairingly until the thinned, scarce, musty air sustained him - then he realized he couldn't see not because he had been blinded, but because it was dark.

At first, Cisco saw nothing but pitch black, couldn't smell anything save for the coppery stink of blood.

There was no light here, only shadowy contours of furniture that was decaying, and eaten away, and dust, floating through the atmosphere.

Furniture, Cisco noticed. A rotting sofa - but broken on one stump, where Ronnie's dog had tried to eat it, when Ronnie was still alive. Then - against the far back wall, destroyed paintings and a crushed clump of metal that could be a stove. Familiar windows, but all shattered.

It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust, but he knew for a fact that he had returned to his living room, from where he had entered.

So... why did his living room look like it was abandoned, and haunted?

And - Cisco shivered violently - why was there no warmth, or light here? The temperature in this dimension had to be at permafrost.

Cisco rubbed at his bared arms, and nervously began calling out his brother's name, his tone quivering against the freezing cold. "D-Dante? Dante - I'm here! I'm here - where are you?!"

He stumbled through the damp, pungent living room, and made his way down the stairs, wishing for all his life that he wasn't alone.

He'd never visited an earth like this one before.

And earths usually had people, unless they were populated by mermaids or fairies - but nonetheless, *people*.

Some form of humanoid life.

This earth was terrifying. Eerie. Ghostly, and quiet, barren and lonely - and everything stank of decay and blood. But he knew he hadn't imagined Dante's scream.

Cisco nearly cried out in fear when he reached the front door. A creature was lying at the threshold - *was it dead?* Oh god - it was huge, the size of a St. Bernard's shepherd - but it was black and wet and thick and slithery, with more limbs than he dared count, and a blurry, black face - *was it dead?*

Was it sleeping? Was it dangerous?

Cisco was not getting good vibes from it, and his vibes were going crazy for that matter. *Get out of here - get out of here - get out of here!* But the entrance behind him - from where he came in - it had stopped pulsing.

Then - footfalls. Heavy, threatening ones.

Cisco stepped over the giant corpse or creature at his door and stumbled out into the darkness - and almost fainted from the adrenaline high. Trees, and giant plants all over the streets. The scent

of fresh blood, more putrid than ever, the ground noticeably wet. The air fuzzy and wet, and dark - but the worst part had to be the bones.

Crushed, human bones.

Skulls. Femurs. Ribs.

All across his doorway, littering the streets, sidewalks. Hanging from the trees, like morbid decorations.

And the giant imprints of clawed feet that surrounded them.

The heavier footprints that approached him from behind filled Cisco's throat with glass, and he mustered as much courage as he could when he shut his eyes tightly and spoke, hardly above a whisper. "Dante... Please, for the love of god, let that be you-"

But his words were cut off when he found himself looking at sharpened, jagged teeth.

Thorny. Glistening, Teeth. Painted in fresh blood. Exhaling hot, sweaty air all over Cisco's face and neck, and Cisco choked on a sob.

The monster swung its giant, meaty black arms, with bloodied, knife-like talons for fingers, at Cisco's frame, and he screamed in a fit of pure, unhindered fear. Hot, fat tears streaked his face as he swiveled on his feet and pumped his legs, running as fast as his weak, exhausted figure would allow.

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't see.

He was tripping over oozing orange plants, getting caught in web-like vines, stumbling his way through a destroyed city with no life, only demons and blood - and Cisco was crying the entire way as the loud, demanding roars behind him grew in tenor, the sound of its running feet growing closer and closer.

Was it right behind him?

Were there creatures others with it?

Cisco didn't dare turn and look - only forced himself to continue running or risk being murdered here in this hellish nightmare, this cold, dark nightmare. He couldn't stop crying in horror, and the tears weren't making anything easier on his vision, so Cisco threw up his hands and began trying to throw breaches as a last means of escape.

But - but the breaches wouldn't work. Heart hammering in his chest, blood roaring in his ears, Cisco cried out weakly as he raised his hands again, trying to cut open another breach.

Nothing.

He didn't know how he opened the breach into this world, how was he going to open one to get out?

So he kept running, kept weeping, kept - and now he started praying in desperation as the beastly roars flourished in proximity behind him.

And something human ran beside him - and Cisco saw a glimpse of matted dark hair, fear-filled brown eyes, and a terrified face, a figure in tattered flannel and soiled jeans, sprinting alongside him, running towards the woods.

"Dante!" Cisco hollered, picking up his speed, no longer caring about the creature that was hunting him, "Dante! *Hermano* - I'm here! I'm here!"

But - But Dante, or whoever that was, turned away, hyperventilating as he vanished into the forest's darkness.

Like a ghost.

He - he had slipped away from Cisco *again*.

And now, there was nothing but the everlasting darkness, and the low approaching howl in the haunting, pitch dark woods Cisco was now running through, searching for his brother.

"Dante!" Cisco screeched again in desperation, out of breath, "*Dante!*"

He had seen him - Dante was right here! He was right *here!*

Where was he?

Where could he have gone to?

Cisco couldn't see again. He could recognize parts of the city before - but now he was engulfed in complete blackness. He could no longer discern the trees from the inky shadows, nor see the coal sky. The blindness was dizzying him. He didn't know where to go, he didn't know where he was - and he didn't know what to do or what else was out there.

His ribcage felt crushed as he gave up, finally breaking into rocky sobs.

Dante...

Darkness.

Hopelessness.

Exhaustion.

Inevitable death.

Cisco had never known darkness nor hopelessness like this before - and he had watched and felt himself be murdered.

His heart still stuttered fitfully in his chest, and Cisco was tired. So, *so tired*.

The fiery cold left him shivering and fatigued, and the nonstop running, an actual demon at his heels, from seeing and hearing his brother who had slipped away again - Cisco allowed himself to close his eyes again, to give in to his weariness, sniffing back tears.

He couldn't go on.

Not like this.

A black gloved hand immediately extended itself through a breach, and quickly - but gently - tugged at Cisco's shirt, reeling him in.

"You're not supposed to go there," a soft female voice whispered, pulling a fragile Cisco into her arms, into safety, before she began to rock him.

Cynthia scowled in worry as she sealed the breach shut, and Cisco trembled in the comfort of her arms, before he began weeping and sobbing uncontrollably again, and dropped himself onto his floor, locking himself in fetal position as he trembled with quivering tears.

Warmth.

Safety.

Protection.

These had all left him in that other dimension.

The dimension where he ran alone, where-

"Dante... my brother-" Cisco murmured faintly, as Cynthia carefully layered several blankets over him. "Please. Cynthia. I need to go back."

"Hey, shh," Cynthia half-cajoled half-scolded, touching his cheek. "You're lucky I sensed you, in there. You were in there for *hours*, you know? And you're lucky you escaped. Nobody ever escapes that realm," she explained, shivering from memory, "The things that are in there are not meant for people to experience. How did you end up there, anyway?"

*The things that are in there are not meant for people to experience.*

All those bones...

The disgustingly fresh scent of blood...

Dante, running away...

"I - my brother called for me. I thought he - dead. But he's alive. That - that thing inside there, it has my brother-"

"Shh, it's okay," Cynthia responded gently, lifting Cisco's head and

shoulders into her lap, holding him close.

"My brother- I saw him," Cisco wept again, shaking, "Cyn - Cynthia, I saw him. He was scared, and he was running away from-"

"Shh..."

And Cynthia found herself looking after her would-be adversary, a complete stranger who had descended into Hell itself, slipping sips of water into his lips, putting damp cloths at his sweaty forehead, comforting him.

Fight to the finish or not - she knew better than anyone that what hid in that realm was a danger that outweighed death itself, a pain more hurtful than the loss of a beloved one.

But she failed to realize that something had escaped through the breach Cisco had left open, and that a deadly creature was now lurking in the shadows of Cisco's home, unbeknownst to them both.

And that it was awaiting nightfall.

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**Hello! Thank you for reading! Please leave a message with your thoughts on your way out! :)**

**- DBV**

## 2. Chapter 2

Barry worriedly paced around Cisco's living room, his heart beating faster than normal out of sheer helplessness.

Only a few hours ago, Charmer had returned to STAR Labs in pure worry, sweat beading across her temples. She called off the duel over H.R., and told them something much more important and urgent had happened - that Cisco had trapped himself in a terrifying, forbidden dimension, but she had found him and saved him. He was safe. He was sick, with a severe fever, and he kept having nightmares - but he was *safe*.

The murders began right after she arrived.

8 pm, that night. The sun had barely set and given way to night's darkness, and only a few *minutes* had passed from when Cynthia vibed into the Cortex, bearing the bad news, when the phones at the police station began ringing like crazy. The first life was lost. Two parents had put their small daughter to bed in her closed, dark bedroom. They found nothing but blood and shredded flesh in her crib when they ran upstairs to her screams a few minutes later.

The only evidence left that pointed to a crime was the shattered bedroom window above the crib, the edges of glass traced with blood.

Hordes of policemen went to the home to the traumatized couple, who lived just a few houses away from Cisco's. Forensics scientists from other districts swarmed to the scene to try and piece together the gore-y murder, puzzled over what looked like giant bite marks in the toddler's mangled body - when another life was struck, another child mysteriously killed.

Hardly an hour later, an elderly woman was heard desolately screaming for help, before her neighbors ran and broke into her home. They found her body torn into several pieces and left in a bloodbath.

Then - a college student who at home alone, finishing her homework,



was also found slain.

Four other victims were found, each in the same, gutted state, each incident taking place minutes after the next.

In the past two hours, eight people had been slaughtered by a mysterious being.

This was the worst massacre the entire state had seen in centuries, and each of the killings had taken place awfully close to Cisco's home.

Police ordered the entire block to evacuate so they could find the killer before he or she struck again, but little did they know the neighborhood still had three lives in tow.

Heart pounding rapidly in his ears, Barry went into Cisco's room, where Cynthia was trying to nourish his friend. Cisco was sickly pale as he lay bundled in blankets, his eyelids blue and numb, his body cold as ice. He kept sweating and shuddering in fear, despite the warmth of the blankets Cynthia burrito-wrapped him in.

Cynthia had traded her leather bounty hunter outfit for an old t-shirt, sweater and a pair of sweats, all out of Cisco's closet, and had her hair tied up in a bun as she worriedly fed an ill Cisco spoonfuls of soup.

Now was no time for fighting.

"He's still not well," she explained to Barry, mopping Cisco's forehead with a cool dampened cloth, "It's going to take him weeks to recover."

"We don't have that much time," Barry countered anxiously, sitting by Cisco's side, "Whatever's out there - it's going to find us. We can't just sit and do nothing - we *have* to get Cisco out of here."

"Your friends at the lab told me they were going to find whatever it was that escaped," Cynthia shot back, shaking her head, "We *can't* move him, Flash. What he went through is going to haunt him for months, and he's still feverish. He's nowhere near ready to move. He needs to rest."

Barry crinkled his eyebrows at her. "Wait - what do you mean *escaped*?" He asked in a curious disappointment, "You're telling me that that *isn't* a metahuman out there?"

Cynthia tensed, chewing at her lower lip. "If it *was* a metahuman, you could stop him. You would've found him immediately. But given the erratic patterns of death, I'm guessing that's no serial killer. It's something that escaped and entered this world from the portal Cisco had left open, from the other world. It's something whose sole purpose is to kill, and devour. You can't stop it. You can only return it to the other dimension."

Cisco trembled, his breathing fitful all of a sudden. Barry took his hand, and Cynthia readjusted the blankets over Cisco's chest. "I've never seen anyone survive in that world, let alone return," she described, darkness falling over her eyes, "Cisco's lucky I sensed him in there."

"What do you mean, 'that world'?" Barry questioned seriously, gently brushing the back of his finger against Cisco's icy cheek, before he faced Cynthia again, police lights flashing outside the window onto her face. "You have to tell us everything you know about the other dimension. We need all the help we can get if we're going to stop that thing."

His phone beeped in his pocket, and Barry pulled it out, reading the screen. *Another homicide just took place*, Joe's text read on the bright screen, *Twin elementary schoolers. On Allberry Road.*

That put the death count at ten. The murderer was only two streets away now.

"Please, Cynthia," Barry asked gravely, facing her again, "More people have been killed. We need to know how to protect them."

Cisco twitched, jerking himself awake. He weakly brought himself to prop his torso up on one elbow, and looked at Cynthia with glassy eyes. "Cindy. It's close. The monster - I can feel it-"

Cynthia's bottom lip quivered as she touched Cisco's hand, and Barry could tell that she felt whatever Cisco sensed too. He wasn't sure how

- but he was certain they were feeling the same thing.

Barry lifted Cisco's other elbow and pulled him into his arms, comforting his trembling friend, throwing Cynthia an expectant glare. "How much time do we have before the next murder?"

"It's done killing," Cynthia sensed, and Cisco extended a shaky hand, reaching for hers again. She wrapped her fingers around his.

"L-looking for - for me," Cisco whispered, his voice nothing more than slow spasms of breath. A single tear traced down his cheek. "Wants to take me b-back."

"Cisco, you're safe. I promise," Barry assured, hugging Cisco tighter and tucking his head under his chin, "Nobody can take you back anywhere. Cynthia?-"

"Some societies and religions believe that dimension is Hell. Others say it's the Netherworld. A few kids in the 1980's dubbed it the Upside Down. But on earth 19, it's called the Realm of Illusions," she answered, tensing again. She closed her eyes and touched her temples, shuddering. "It's a dimension connected to every universe, and is parallel to the world inhabited by humans. The same places and buildings-"

She winced suddenly, and loudly, grasping her forehead.

"What is it?" Barry questioned in concern.

"It's taunting me, the devourer," she murmured, breathing deeply before recomposing herself and opening her eyes again, speaking urgently, "Opening a portal or breach into that world is *always* dangerous. They tried it once, in the 1980's. Didn't go so well. That world - hungry. *Always* hungry. The devourers - call them demons, knife-teeth, demogorgans, whatever - they start bleeding into this world slowly, searching for blood - and then the dimension starts tempting you."

"Tempting you?"

"With illusions. Of people you've lost. Of people you used to love. That's how you get stuck in there, before the devourers find you.

Sometimes people we've lost *do* end up in there, but you can't be sure if someone you've seen is real, or actually there, or is just a trick the realm is playing on you to keep you there."

"Dante real," Cisco croaked softly, hardly above a whisper.

Barry touched his friend's forehead, before a thought struck him.

"You said it was a parallel world?" He asked, as police sirens blared in the street outside.

"Yes," Cynthia conceded, looking to the window.

"An *exact* replica of this one? With people?"

"No human inhabitants. Only the souls of the lost."

"What happens if... this world was flipped?" Barry asked cautiously, rubbing Cisco's numb shoulders, "If someone went back and flipped the timeline around?"

"What do you mean, flipped?"

"If someone went back in time, did something that altered history across the entire dimension on *this* world, then went back in time again to undo all of the change?"

"You mean a full-fledged timeline reversion?" Cynthia asked worriedly, before she almost shouted, "You mean *two* of them?!"

Barry reddened with guilt. "Yes. Would something like that affect the parallel world too?"

"Oh, definitely," Cynthia answered, chills fleeing down Barry's spine at her lack of hesitation.

"It's basic physics, Barry. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, only transferred or changed. The same applies to human souls. If their lives are reverted through timeline change, or if they're wiped out of existence, they go to the Illusion Realm. That world acts as a wasteland for all the change created by reverting the timeline, and for the lives lost in that reversion."

"What lost lives? Like, people who just die, or...?"

"People who lived in the other timeline but died in this one, or in the original and true timeline," she contended.

"Energy from timeline reversion takes the misplaced lives to the Illusion Realm, where they become food for the devourers, as if they're this world's forgotten garbage. The devourers then wipe them out to prevent change in their realm. Where else did you think they'd go?"

"Dante real," Cisco answered softly, weeping.

So Dante *was* trapped in the Realm of Illusions, Barry realized with guilt swelling in every nerve, as he wiped away Cisco's tears. And now Cisco's brother was struggling to survive, in a world riddled with carnivorous monsters - devourers, Cynthia called them.

All the lives changed during Flashpoint were trashed away into the Illusion Realm, where they become prey for powerful, murderous monsters.

And by that knowledge, Nora Allen would be down there too, Barry thought with a heavy heart. And his father, Henry, too. And maybe non-Killer Frost Caitlin. And everyone else who he had hurt.

All trapped.

Alchemy must have been using the energy from that realm to bring the others back to life, or restore the powers and memories the metahumans from Flashpoint had, Barry quickly realized.

And if Alchemy was bringing those people back for Savitar...

That meant Savitar was siphoning off of energy from *both* the Speed Force *and* the Upside Down.

"Barry, the devourer's coming closer," Cynthia warned, throwing a breach open beside the bed. "I'm - I'm sorry," she stammered, awkwardly picking up Cisco's blanketed legs, "You were right. We can't stay here."

Barry lifted Cisco by the shoulders, Cynthia holding his weakened frame by the legs, and they carried Cisco into the breach, soon finding themselves at the Cortex inside STAR.

"Barry-" Julian blurted in surprise, furiously typing into one of the computers at the main desk beside Caitlin, who quickly rose to help Barry and Cynthia with Cisco.

"We have to figure out a way to catch the devourer," Barry announced, walking over and laying Cisco down on the bed in the med bay, before facing the rest of the team, "The murderer isn't a metahuman. It's a vicious creature that escaped into our world from the world Cisco was stuck in. We have to find it."

"What do you mean, it's not a metahuman?" Iris asked, Wally right behind her.

"It's a creature from a world of death," Cynthia responded, urgently running over to the team in the Cortex to explain what she knew.

HR stared at the familiar shirt she was wearing for only a second, before he spoke, uncomfortable. "So, is there a reason why its called a devourer? Is it like a mythical demon? That devours people?"

Cynthia ignored the stupidity of his question and turned back to Caitlin's lab, instead searching through cabinets and shelves, until she held up frozen red packets - frozen blood. "Is there a butcher shop nearby?" She asked the Team, "Devourers are attracted to the scent of fresh meat, and blood. And people who cross into their dimension, like Cisco and I did. It's coming for us. We have to set up a trap."

"Yeah, there's a meat shop, on Parkins Street," Wally answered helpfully, rubbing his hands.

Cynthia nodded at him. "Good. Go quickly. Bring as much raw bloody meat as you can," Cynthia instructed, and Wally zipped out of STAR Labs in a fit of gold lightning, before Cynthia faced Barry. "The washcloths I was wiping Cisco's sweat away with. The clothes he was wearing when I pulled him out. His pillowcases. And my Charmer outfit. Laundry, clothing, everything. Bring them to me. Now."

And Barry nodded and left without asking any questions, breaking into a panic-filled run, with papers and instruments fluttering through the air as both speedsters crisply left the lab.

"What can we do to help?" Caitlin asked, instinctively slipping on a pair of gloves, Julian stepping beside her with his glasses on and his sleeves rolled up.

"Build something for me that will dilute and intensify any samples of Cisco's blood, sweat - anything with his scent on it," she ordered, still digging through the drawers before she faced them again, "And maybe a very powerful stun gun."

"Like an incense diffuser, or a reed-diffusing candle, only several times stronger," Julian realized, before touching Caitlin's elbow, "Come on. There might be something stronger in the other lab."

And the two scientists left, leaving Cynthia with only Iris and HR left in Caitlin's lab.

"What about me? What can I do?" Iris asked, walking over to Cisco's bedside and touching his face, before looking to Cynthia with imperativeness in her eyes.

Cynthia wrinkled her nose in Iris's direction. "You're standing five feet away from me but I can smell you from here. You smell like roses. How?"

"It's the perfume I'm wearing..." Iris responded awkwardly, shrugging one shoulder.

"It's strong. Got a bottle on you?" She asked authoritatively, and Iris nodded her head yes as Cynthia continued requests, "Perfume. Cologne. Chlorine. Air freshener. Give me anything that can block out mine and Cisco's scents. Quickly. And let your cop father know there won't be any more deaths. We're leading the devourer right to us, and we'll need a few weapons."

"I'll go get air freshener and cologne!" HR stammered, waving a thin wooden wand as he awkwardly raced out.

Cynthia turned on her heels and grabbed an energy drink from the

tiny fridge, snapping the can open as she returned to her bleary-eyed, pale Cisco. To a bleary-eyed, pale Cisco, she corrected. This wasn't her Cisco.

"Come on," she urged, putting the can to his lips, "I know this isn't good for you, but you need to be able to stand. And run."

He gulped a few sips, before spitting. "No more - I can't take that crap-" and he sat up to hang an arm around Cynthia's shoulders. She put the can away and wound her arm around his torso, and helped him lift himself off the bed, before he lurched forward, stumbling. She quickly caught him by the shoulders, holding his light-weight frame up.

"Still weak, sorry," he mumbled, and Cynthia could hear wheezing in his chest.

He had no strength, she noted. She grimaced, and extended a hand to throw open a breach. "Can you make it to the other side of that?" She coaxed, rubbing his shoulder, "Come on. Just a few more steps, and you can pass out again. I'm sorry, but I can't walk you all the way. I have to help your friends get that thing out of here."

"Ts'not evil," he slurred, tottering away from her in imbalance.

"What?" She asked, steadying him again.

"D'vour'r. It's not evil. Just lost," he garbled, his eyes glossy as he tried to look at her, "It's in my brain. Sending me messages. Head hurts, its a puppy."

Cynthia scowled, and guided him forward to the entrance of the swirling blue hole, gently pushing him before she accidentally let him fall sluggishly through the portal, and she closed the breach just in time to hear him cry out as he shakily fell flat on his chest.

"Oops," she mumbled to herself, biting her finger. But it didn't matter. Cisco was downstairs now, on the floor of the breach room. He would be safe there.

Barry was the first to return, holding a pile of various clothes, followed by Wally, carrying a 20-pound bag of red, juicy meat. Both



were in costume.

"What do we do with these?" Wally asked, and Cynthia gestured for them both to follow her. She led them down into the Pipeline, and signaled for Barry to open one of the cells.

"The meat," she explained, and Wally held the bag out to her. She took it from him and led the two speedsters out of the Pipeline. "Devourers are attracted to the smell of blood, and flesh. It'll also be looking for me and Cisco, because we were in its territory, and devourers eat everything that crosses into their territory. We have to leave a trail of mine and Cisco's clothes, and the meat, that leads into the cell back there, which is where the trap will be. Then we'll stun and kill it, I'll quickly open a breach and we can send its corpse back to the Illusion Realm."

"Got it," Wally and Barry answered in unison. They quickly began tearing the clothes into smaller pieces, and contorting their noses into looks of disgust, they began laying a path of meat and sweaty clothing into the cell.

Caitlin and Julian returned to the Cynthia with a box-shaped machine, and wore looks of revulsion at the bloody meat she was helping Barry and Wally path the ground with.

"What do you have there?" Wally asked, before Cynthia stepped up.

"You'll want to go wash your hands..." she suggested, and he and Barry both left.

"It's a device that can diffuse the scent of anything you put inside it," Julian explained, turning the box around to show Cynthia, "If you want to lure the creature here with a false source of yours' and Cisco's scent, this will do the trick."

"Good," Cynthia judged. She picked up whatever was left of the scraps of clothing Barry and Wally had torn, along with a few remaining pieces of meat, and stuffed them in the device. She took the machine from Julian, and he and Caitlin followed her into the Pipeline cell.

She placed it in the back corner of the enclosure, before turning to Caitlin. "The devourer is close. How do we turn this on?"

Caitlin held up a palm-sized device. "Remote control."

"Just what the doctor ordered. Where's Iris? And that HR fool?"

She was interrupted by the sound of Iris's heels clacking against the floor as she rushed into the Pipeline, with Joe and HR behind her. All three were holding various-sized bottles, expectantly looking to Cynthia for instructions.

"Are these perfumes? And scented sprays?" Cynthia asked, as they handed the bottles to her.

"Yes," Iris answered, and Joe frowned at the meat on the floor and in the cell.

"What exactly is the plan here?" He asked in strict concern, "Ten people died tonight. I don't want any more people getting hurt."

"Plan. Yes," Cynthia answered, as Wally and Barry returned, Wally squirting a huge amount of hand sanitizer into Cynthia's opened palm, "So. The devourer's getting closer. It's right outside the lab. The plan is to lure it into the cell with the meat and the scent diffuser, and once it's inside and we know it is distracted, we can kill it and I can open a portal and quickly get it out of here before other devourers escape that same portal. Your world will be safe."

"What about us?" Barry asked. Cynthia smiled and threw one of the bottles at him.

"Spray up. If we want to catch it, we need to make sure it won't turn around and come for us instead. Mask your scents. Smell like roses."

The room soon bloomed with a powerful rancor of the combined stink of blood, cheap cologne, salty sweat, and flowery perfume, and Wally gagged as the air grew more stuffy, his face reddening. Cynthia patted his shoulder sympathetically, and Julian scowled at the security camera footage he was studying on a tablet.

"Is this your devourer?" He questioned, as the screen displayed a

black, slithery creature the size of a toddler, with a faceless head, prowling into the Cortex, sniffing the floor before its head parted into five gorey pieces lined with glistening teeth, and made a loud sound that was something between a desperate whimper, and a hungry roar.

"That's the one," Cynthia swallowed, and Julian quickly put the tablet away as Cynthia glowered and threw another portal open leading to the breach room downstairs, where she had sent Cisco.

"Everyone. Go," she ordered sternly. Wally walked in first, holding both Joe's and Iris's hands. Then HR. Julian waited for Caitlin to go first before he followed after her.

"And what about you?" Barry asked, as the others filed through the breach to safety.

Cynthia held up her other hand, flexing her gloved fingers. "I won't be able to open a breach for the devourer if I can't see where it is. I have to stay."

Barry nodded in understanding, and touched her shoulder. "We appreciate you volunteering to help us, and for caring for Cisco... If you're scared, I can stay with you-"

"Not scared," Cynthia muttered, throwing him a dirty look, "I am not doing this for you. For any of you. Now get out."

Barry paused, anxious as he tried to study her hidden emotions, before the fierceness of her scowl warned him not to stay any longer, and he too left.

Finally, she thought, canvassing the trap's set-up.

Alone.

In a dark, foul-smelling hallway and Pipeline chamber on an earth, 19 dimensions away from hers, but nonetheless, alone.

She curled and uncurled her fingers in anticipation, standing and waiting to throw the breach that would put an end to this madness, to the murders and the haunting fear.

Outside the Pipeline, Cynthia could hear the devourer mewling loudly as it wandered through the lab, lost. The clacking of its claws stopped, presumably to whiff at the trail of meat Wally had placed, before Cynthia heard the chomping of teeth and the smacking of five sets of lips.

More clacking and exploring, before more chomping and grotesque, wet chewing.

The pattern continued for three long minutes, before Cynthia tensed at the sight of shadows elongating against the wall in front of the Pipeline's entrance.

It was here.

*(Guys?!)* Barry's terrified voice crackled through the comms Julian had given her, interrupting her determined thoughts. *(Where is Cisco?!)*

"What do you mean?" Cynthia whispered in disbelief, pulling the comms closer to make sure she heard properly. "He - he should be in the breach room. That's where I sent him. Downstairs, where you all are."

*(He's not here,)* Julian urged, Cynthia's hair standing on end, *(He's left the breach room. He's still out there, in the lab.)*

Her heart skipped a beat in her chest, before she ran out of the Pipeline, leaving the carefully crafted trap and her comms behind.

*What was Ramon thinking?! She thought in panic, racing up the stairs two at a time.*

Those things nearly hunted him to death in the Illusion Realm! One escaped, and was sending very strong signals that it was searching for Cisco, and that it was in a murderous mood!

She'd sent him to safety, why would he leave?!

She was huffing as she sprinted through each room in the lab, terrified she would run into the devourer before she would find Cisco - before she ran into a knife, the blade piercing painfully - and

deeply- into the base of her stomach.

White-hot terror screamed in her veins, her brain blanking in excruciating shock as she registered the sight before her.

Cisco widened his bleary eyes, and let go of the knife's handle, quickly holding her by the shoulders. "Cindy! Oh my god - I'm so sorry! I was looking for the-"

"We have to hide," she interjected in a murmur, now hyperventilating rapidly, and she awkwardly leaned into Cisco's side as he feebly tried to support her, managing to half-support half-drag her into his nearby workshop.

Adrenaline sang under his skin, as he lowered Cynthia against the wall, unable to peel his eyes away from where the blood flowered darkly through her shirt. The knife was wedged perpendicular to her waist, a few inches deep. "I'm - I'm so sorry-"

"Why'd you leave?" She hissed in pain, shutting her eyes, covering the wound with both hands. "You were *safe*."

His hand shook as he stared at the blood blooming at her mid-section, before he met her furious and teary eyes. "The - the creature. It doesn't want to kill me," he stuttered, sitting beside her.

She slit her eyes, shaking her head no. "That's wrong," she implored, "It killed a dozen people, ow-" she winced again loudly, clutching the knife before Cisco placed his cold hand over her hot one.

"Don't take the knife out," he advised, squeezing her bloody hand to comfort her, "It's holding back blood flow."

"If it didn't - didn't want to kill you," she huffed angrily, leaning her head back against the wall, "Why were you carrying the knife in the first place?"

He cringed, braving a smile. "Um... In case I was wrong? About it not wanting to kill me?"

"I swear to *Christ*, Cisco-"

"Shh!"

The sound of clawed footfalls grew louder outside, and both Cisco and Cynthia grew edgy. The monster was right outside the workshop, and they were trapped in a small, crowded room, unable to defend themselves.

The door broke down, the baby devourer standing over the fallen wooden pane on all fours, panting as it raised its head into the air, sniffing.

Panic burned in Cisco's feverish throat.

It was hardly four feet away, pressing its snout against the ground as it sniffed eagerly.

"Stay... still..." Cisco advised in a tight whisper, his heart stuttering at the sight of the monster slowly pacing closer to them.

"The blood," Cynthia squeaked with tears as she looked to her waist, "It's coming for the blood, Cis-"

He gently covered her mouth to silence her, brushing her tears away with his thumbs, and quickly removed and handed Cynthia his sweater to cover and press over the wound.

The devourer approached cautiously, and lifted its ugly head.

The creature didn't have any eyes, but Cisco was certain it was staring up at him, observing his every move. It sat like that for a still minute, before resting its hind legs and sitting on its haunches, expectant.

Cynthia reached a hand up from her waist to clutch Cisco's wrist, but Cisco's eyes were trained on the creature, as if transfixed. He slowly rose, but Cynthia weakly tugged him down by his wrist. "No! What are you doing?!"

"It's not here to hurt us, Cindy," Cisco coaxed as he watched the beast wait before him. He released his wrist from her tight grasp, before facing the beast again, "It's lost. I think it wants me to help it get back home-"

"No," Cynthia snarled, groaning loudly as she wrenched the knife free from her womb, a tight pain-filled grunt leaving her throat as she quickly flicked her wrist and shot the knife forward into the creature's side. The devourer cried out loudly, opening and closing its black petaled mouth several times, rearing its head, screaming and thrashing.

"Cynthia!" Cisco hollered, horrified for both her and the monster, and Barry and Wally immediately rushed to the room, both widening their eyes in shock at the scene before them.

"You're hurt!" Barry exclaimed, at the sight of Cynthia clutching her oozing wound, dizzy against the wall.

"You killed it!" Wally gasped at the creature lying on its side, kicking at nothing, flailing its small body.

"Don't - don't let it die!" Cisco implored, grabbing a washcloth from the surface of his desk. He stumbled as he sat down by the creature's back, touching a hand to the back of the creature's neck in reassurance, pressing the washcloth into the cut.

Julian, Caitlin and Iris also arrived to the scene.

"Please - help Cynthia!" Cisco half-begged half-demanded, mustering energy to lift up the small bleeding demogorgon, as Iris and Caitlin ran over to assist Cynthia.

Julian stepped away from Cisco in fear, holding up his hands in self defense. "Be - be careful with that thing! It's a killing machine!"

"It's lost!" Cisco defended harshly, before running out of the workshop with the creature in his arms. Pained moans left Cynthia's throat as Iris and Caitlin tried to lift her up, before Barry joined them. "How did you get hurt?" He asked in concern.

"Cisco... stabbed me," she muttered between gritted teeth, with her eyes shut closed, thin streaks of tears welling down her cheek.

"But nobody's in any more danger, correct?" Julian questioned hesitantly, apprehensively glancing around the room.

"Cisco will be, once I get up," Cynthia seethed as she was carried away.

Guilt swelled within Cisco's chest as he watched Cynthia's eyes slowly flutter shut, her body falling limp as she finally gave into the wound's shock.

The creature in his arms mewled quietly in pain, before falling silent and pursing its lips in her direction.

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In a few hours, all danger had subsided, and a few more rivulets of strength returned to Cisco's bones, adrenaline receding. Weakness no longer plagued his every step nor halted his ability to clearly breathe, but that same fatigue was now replaced with mixed emotions.

First things first - Cynthia deserved a full-fledged apology, Cisco thought, slowly entering the med lab.

Caitlin was mixing a chemical at the counter - probably a serum or something, Cisco realized, and Iris was helping by Cynthia's bedside, taking her vitals.

Caitlin arched an eyebrow at her friend, before walking over and authoritatively shoving a thermometer into Cisco's mouth, wearing a curt frown on her neat face. "You're lucky you only got an inch or so deep," she mentioned, tilting her head towards Cynthia and Iris, offering a smile. "It's just a tiny stomach wound. She'll be all right, Cisco."

She placed a hand on Cisco's shoulders when she noticed a familiar shadow of shame falling over her friend's face, before pulling him into a tight hug, rubbing his back as his tears spilled onto her shoulder.

"'Isco," a soft voice demurred behind them, and Caitlin looked over her shoulder to see Cynthia with a small but angry pout, her eyes half open. Iris touched her hand to Cynthia's bicep. "Hey - Easy now," she coaxed, as Cynthia's glassy eyes slowly focused on her, "You're still on pain meds. You don't want to move too much."



"You here to talk?" Cynthia coughed at Cisco, her brows furrowing in anger when Cisco met her eyes from across the room.

"Could you give us a minute?" Cisco asked, collecting his courage in the face of Cynthia's weakened, yet dark, fury.

Caitlin nodded and left the room, and Iris followed after, pausing only to touch Cisco's face in sympathy and embracing his thinned figure closely before exiting the room- and leaving him with an angry bounty hunter.

Cynthia threw the blanket back and swung her legs off the bed without so much as a grunt, walking directly over to Cisco.

"You're not hurt?" He asked in surprise, as she approached effortlessly.

She scowled up at him, locking her jaw. "You can use your powers to manipulate your body into healing. You ought to know that."

"Oh," Cisco mumbled, fidgeting with his fingers as he was unable to look away from her anger, "I wasn't aware."

Awkward tension passed before them, before Cynthia sighed and folded her arms over her chest, her unforgiving frown still uncomfortably trained on him.

"Why'd you save it?" She asked sternly.

He paled at her sudden accusation. "Wh - What?"

"I asked you a question," Cynthia demanded, this time politely. She noticed his frightened discomfort, and forced herself to soften as she explained, "Cisco, you saved a creature that murdered ten people. You defended it, instead of killing it on the spot where it could have done God knows *what* to us. I'm just asking you *why*."

"Why..."

"Yes."

"It - it communicated with me," Cisco stated, swallowing the lump in

his throat. He put his hands behind his back, and looked Cynthia in the eye. "It was looking for me. The people it killed - it was hungry, and in a new environment it had never been to before. What it does was wrong, but you can't blame it."

"So now we're justifying a massacre, hm?" Cynthia challenged, narrowing her eyes, crossing her arms again, "And why exactly was Ba Ba Black Sheep looking for its master?"

Cisco's bottom lip quivered, but he crossed his arms, and returned the unforgiving scowl. "I told you. It was communicating with me, sending me messages. Of - Of *Dante*, okay? I think it wants me to come back to the Upside Down and find him."

"No." The word was edged with fear, but intense in resentment, as Cynthia stomped her foot tensely. She shook her head, and pushed past him. "That's an *illusion*, Cisco. It's trying to lure you. That thing only kills, and its using your memories against you. You can't go back down there."

"Cynthia-"

"I was only able to save you because we have an empathetic link, because of our powers," Cynthia muttered harshly, her gait unrelenting as she went down to the breach room through the labs. Cisco followed after her.

"I saved you on the premises that you wandered down there as a mistake, and that you would know better than to try and descend there again," she continued, irate, before turning around and jabbing her finger into his chest. "You and I just went through something very terrible. We could've died. You. Me. Barry. Iris, Caitlin, that Draco guy - it could've killed all of us, and I tried to send it back, and you ruined that. And now you're harboring it like it's some kind of pet, and *not* a bloodthirsty monster."

Cisco grimaced in shame.

In the few hours he had known Cynthia, he was able to tell that she didn't get angry easily, unless she was pushed beyond her limits.

The mix of anger, fear and desperation in her eyes was more than enough to warrant she hadn't enjoyed her visit here. He wanted to assure her that he knew what he was doing and what he was getting himself into. At the same time, he wanted to listen to her and believe her. Innocent or not, that thing *did* violently kill ten innocent people, and there was nothing they could do about the lives lost, the pain created.

And like it or not - that monster could *very well* be baiting him in for murder, and Cisco would be walking into a trap by leading it back down.

He pursed his lips before he spoke. "Cindy? Why does the Upside Down matter to you so much? You said nobody returned from it, but I did-"

"*With* my help."

"Still. Together, we made it out," he argued gently, holding up his hands, "My brother is down there. I know he is. Why are you trying to stop me from going down and saving him? Wouldn't you have done the same for someone you loved?-"

And Cisco knew he said something wrong, because the color quickly drained from her face the second he finished his question, her eyes staring up at him in shock. She bit down on her bottom lip, and her hands shook as she balled her fingers into fists.

As if the statement broke her.

"I - I'm sorry," Cisco tried awkwardly, but she turned and walked away, deeper into the downstairs hall.

"I told you about that empath link, didn't I?" She murmured, facing away.

Cisco watched her as her fists shook. "Yeah. It's because we have the same abilities, you said-"

"I had a partner who had our powers as well," she interjected calmly as she picked on a fingernail, avoiding eye contact.

"Like, a partner?" Cisco asked quietly, standing back to give her space, "Or a *partner*... partner?"

"Both," she answered, her throat straining. She wiped a fist at her face as she turned back down the hall with her back to him. "The Elders asked us to hunt down and find a villain named Abra Kadabra, who had breached through the future to our world, and was wreaking havoc across Earth-19. When we tried to fight him, Kadabra sent my partner down into the Upside Down. And my partner died there. He was murdered..."

Cisco froze in place, heart stuttering. "I'm sorry..." he murmured uselessly, looking to the floor in shame.

"The empath link we shared didn't make anything easier," Cynthia explained, forcing a single, chopped laugh as she brushed her hair out of her face. She turned to Cisco with that same lost and broken look in her eyes. "I could feel him, struggling to survive. Trying to keep away from the devourers, but they were taunting him with old memories of comfort and safety - memories of me. And I couldn't do anything about it."

A tiny choking sound left her throat as she held back a sob, and she climbed onto the breaching platform. "I felt him *die*, Cisco. And it was the worst, most painful thing I'd ever felt - being able to feel how weak, and starved he was. I heard his screams as he was being killed, and felt every pain he felt as those beasts tore him bone from bone, and I *couldn't* figure out how to open that breach to that dimension to save him. I wasn't able to do anything, until it was too late - and by then, it was of no use. I hadn't been able to save him, and he was gone. It was the worst feeling ever... Worse than a stab to my stomach."

Cisco offered a smile at her last, sarcastic remark. "So... that's what you meant when you told Barry you weren't doing this for us? You're doing it in honor of your partner?"

"You heard that?" She questioned with a small grin.

He tapped his temple with his index finger, smirking. "I can still pick up a few things, you know. Even if I am half dead out of exhaustion."

She laughed, and her own smile soon melted away as sad thoughts passed through her mind. "You're really going to go to the Upside Down anyway, aren't you?" She asked, dejected as she shoved her fists into the sweater's pockets

"I'm sorry, Cindy," he replied quietly, "I think I have to."

She exhaled silently, but nodded at him. "Then I'm not staying. I can't watch you die again."

He frowned in confusion at her. "*Again?*"

"I can't watch you suffer, again," she corrected hesitantly, biting the inside of her cheek nervously, "You know what I meant."

"Did I?"

"I'm going to Earth-19. And I won't be coming back."

"What about H.R.?"

"What about him?"

"You came here for him, before I..."

"Interrupted my plans?" She scoffed, smirking as she shrugged a single shoulder, "I mean, I *can* kill the useless bastard if you want-"

"No! No thank you!" Cisco laughed sardonically, shaking his head before scowling, "I'll admit he is annoying, and unbelievably useless, and he's played the damsel in distress, like, ten times more often than anyone else, but..."

"But he doesn't deserve to die?" Cynthia teased, wearing a crooked, disapproving smile, "He hasn't done anything actually wrong, like the demogorgon you just adopted? As depressing as it may be, Cisco, that's the same thing my partner would have said. Harrison Wells is allowed to live, but on the condition that he never returns home."

"Why would you leave me with him?" Cisco joked, rolling his eyes. He shrugged, with a small, comfortable grin. "At least let me buy you a coffee before you leave. To apologize for stabbing you, I mean."

Cynthia's smile turned apologetic again as she shook her head no, and turned around to face the back of the breach room. "The coffee is incredible, but I've got to return home. I've had enough of this despicable backwater you call home."

She extended an arm, and power surged through her fingers in the form of a spiraling, blue portal, the breach's energy billowing against the wall. Cynthia took a single hesitant step forward, but threw Cisco one last concerned glance over her shoulder. "I'm asking you one last time. Are you serious about going down there?"

Cisco's lip twitched to say no, but he stood firmly by his choice. "Yes. I am."

"Then... good luck, and goodbye, Vibe."

"Goodbye, Charmer."

And she was gone - and Cisco felt both relieved, and hollowed, at her departure.

Truth be told - the things she said were scaring him.

He was in no position to let fear guide his morality, not if Dante was still alive, and Cynthia's constant worrying and nagging was sure to influence him the wrong way, even if it was for good intentions.

At the same time... the fact that she actually *left* felt like a dizzying warning.

She knew better than he did about the Upside Down.

She lost someone close, and she wasn't going to watch someone else suffer, even if respecting their decisions meant she wouldn't stand by and watch them die.

Feel them die.

Cisco shivered, and turned to the other hallway - leading to the particle accelerator. He walked past cells and cells, until the disgusting stench of hot meat soiled the air.

Cisco had done his best to make the demogorgon comfortable. Caitlin had refused to help treat it, but allowed Cisco to use any of her supplies if he wanted, and Cisco had done his best to tame the small beast before cleansing and stitching the wound Cynthia had left in its side.

As the beast slept, Cisco had pushed all the meat into the cell it was sleeping in, so it wouldn't go hungry and start killing again, and on a better note, he also decided to leave the scraps of his clothing with the monster, so the monster wouldn't go looking for him again either.

"Cindy says you're a killer," Cisco stated emptily, and the monster stirred on the other side of the glass, lifting a paw and swatting the air before settling down again, nuzzling its head against a pillow of old laundry.

Such a small being. It was the size of a dog. Neither human nor animal, completely, but had a humanoid body, walking on all fours in a babyish crawl. The feebleness with which it moved definitely proved that it was young - far too young, a baby demogorgon, Cisco mused to himself - but the deadly picture it left at the crime scene made it evident that it was still strong, and a threat.

It had told Cisco he was lost - *home! home!* - it seemed to beg, in Cisco's mind, and Cisco recalled how he forced himself to get up from the bed, grab the small dagger Caitlin left in the bottom drawer, and went to go find it.

And the way it *screamed* when Cynthia had hurt it - if the pain Cynthia felt when her partner died was *anything* like that sorrowful sound echoing in his skull, Cisco understood why she would still be haunted by the memory.

"I'm gonna be taking you back," Cisco promised, folding his arms over his chest, before he shook his head, "Charmer said its a suicide mission, because her partner died in your world, and she thinks I'll die too- *Aah!*-"

He gasped out loud and clutched his head with both hands, knees shaking as the creature lifted its innocent head at the sound of his voice.

The colors of the lab's walls and floors, and the cell before him all melted and blurred together, the change in his vision hurting his eyes - until he saw all black again.

No. No, he thought, as new surroundings replaced the lab around him.

A small cry caught in his throat as he saw the same black forest, the coal sky, the mossy decayed floor- *it's a vibe, it's just a vibe*, he assured himself - but nonetheless, the vision was realistic enough to stop Cisco from breathing, adrenaline spiking again in his veins in fear, ready to run.

There - in the far right corner, under that fat-trunked tree, Cisco saw something. Something tiny moved amidst a tangled nest of leaves and sticks, and the same demogorgon's head popped out, though it was smaller. Much smaller, and fragile-looking.

The creature seemed to be waiting, blinking its nonexistent eyes as it sat patiently in the dark, safety of the nest. Hours passed, before it grew agitated and began braying - a weak, croak-like noise that swelled into something eerily similar to an infant's cry.

Cisco's heart felt crushed, as the beast's emotions overwhelmed him.

The beast had been abandoned at birth, Cisco realized. It was left to starve, as it waited for its mother to return, seeking warmth and protection. The small beast lifted an unbelievably scrawny leg out of the nest, before flopping downwards onto its face. Brushing away dirt from its head, it began sniffing the air and ventured out into the dangerous world, crawling on thin, wobbly limbs to find its mother.

Cisco followed the creature's memory as it caught a thin smear of blood painted onto the ground, and a sickly smile formed on its mouth as it followed the red trail marking the soil. He watched in heartbreaking pity as the tiny thing finally found a larger demogorgon not far from the nest. The bigger creature was enormous, at least ten feet in length, and had been left dead in a tangle of broken limbs, its skull crushed. Presumably killed by a larger beast.



The beast hadn't been abandoned at birth, Cisco understood sadly. Its mother had been killed, defending her young.

*Sleeping?* the animal seemed to ask, pawing at the creature mangled corpse. It sniffed her skin in a playful manner, before conveying a simple message. *Wake up. Wake up. Feed. Play.*

Cisco wished he could turn away and not have to look, not have to watch as the baby moved around its mother, weakly shoving her, tearfully demanding that she wake up, oblivious to all the blood around her skull and neck.

It stayed with her for eight more hours, begging her to get up, before finally nuzzling itself under her limp, crumpled arm.

*Wake up... No more sleeping,* it suggested softly, nudging its head against a shattered chin.

When it was clear the mother wouldn't wake up, the beast turned away and wandered off, dejected. It picked at plants in the forest, growing disgusted by them, and gnawed at rotting carrion. It found its way to the outskirts of the city - Upside Down Central City, Cisco noted - and he followed the vibe as the beast continued its search for nourishment.

"*Cynthia!*" someone hollered, not far from where they were. The infant beast perked up at the sound.

"*Cynthia!*" the scream came again, with heavy panting and the scuffle of tired feet running closer, "*Cynthia! Babe! I'm stuck in here! I'm right here! I'm not gone!*"

And Cisco saw himself sprint into the clearing, hyperventilating.

Except... this wasn't him.

This guy had Cisco's face, and his body - but he was slightly taller, and his dark hair was neatly tied back in a long ponytail, and instead of a vibe suit, he wore a black leather suit that matched Charmer's costume.

The other him looked around the clearing, horror painted across his

face as he brought both hands to his mouth and bellowed Cynthia's name again - and Cisco immediately understood the situation, his heart weighing itself down.

Earth 19's Vibe had been Cynthia's partner.

Sure, Cynthia didn't know Cisco, and at best considered him an acquaintance, if *anything* - but the thought of someone who looked, talked and shared several qualities with her former lover delving down into this hell?

No wonder she'd teared up a little, earlier during their argument in the hall when Cisco was being stubborn.

The creature walked over to him, and placed its paws on Ponytail Vibe's legs. *Happy. Happy happy. New mother. New mother. Yes?*

Ponytail Vibe looked down and sneered in resentment. He backed away from the beast, and ran deeper into the city, as far away from the small pathetic creature as he could. The beast cried in protest, and followed after him.

He found Ponytail Vibe sleeping in a shabby, dark lean-to shelter, and cuddled up against his side. Ponytail Vibe screamed when he woke up - and the chase began again.

*Playing game!* the beast communicated telepathically to Ponytail Vibe, who panicked as the animal caught up to him. *Good game. Running bad. But - good game!*

"You smelly cat... thing!" Ponytail Vibe acknowledged in confusion, panting as he sprinted in the cold, "It's not a game! You're going to kill me! Leave me alone!"

*No!*

"Leave me alone, I said!"

*Cat-thing stay! New mother no sleep!*

"New mother?- What in the world-" Vibe remarked in disbelief, huffing as he slowed to a stop, and the creature arrived to him and

began licking his shoes.

*Good mother. No run.*

"Good cat-animal monster thing?" Ponytail mumbled in shock, as the small beast gleefully jogged circles around him.

The other Cisco had no idea how to react. A harmless creature was of no use to him down here, not if his only goal was to find his way out. Ponytail Vibe pushed himself to headaches in his efforts to communicate with Cynthia, desperately trying to open breaches back to his home.

The demogorgon was confused about what New Mother was doing, but it stayed with him. It warned him when "bad mothers" were approaching, and the other Vibe was thoroughly impressed when it caught a smaller animal in its five-lipped mouth and brought it back to him, dropping it at its feet.

If he couldn't leave, Vibe decided he still had to survive. "The food here sucks," he noted, petting his creepy friend, as he bit into an orange plant, followed by a small shred of meat, and a dead green slug. "But it'll do. Come on. I have to find a way back home. I miss a good old-fashioned burger. And Cynthia's worried sick up there..."

Home. Cynthia.

They were able to find a safe spot, and Cisco recognized their new haven to be his Upside-Down apartment, where he had first arrived when he fell into the Upside Down.

The other Vibe had no idea what this place was. But it felt familiar. And he was safe. He was ill, with homesickness and severe malnutrition, but he could rest for the first time in days, he thought, crashing onto Cisco's couch.

The baby demogorgon bounced onto his lap, and curled up for a nap, and the other Cisco immediately coughed out blood, wiping his mouth with his fist, before he lurched forward and stood up, vomiting on the floor.

Large chunks mixed with the puddle blood on the ground.

Food poisoning, both Cisco and his doppelganger realized, the pet watching him in fear.

His leather managed to protect him from the cold, and he was fast enough to evade danger, skilled enough to survive.

But the "food" here was not meant to sustain a human. If he couldn't find his way out, Earth-19's Vibe would die of food poisoning, or worse - be killed by the demogorgons hunting for him.

Weakly, Earth-19's Vibe began to search for a way out, the small creature staying by his side constantly.

He'd call for Cynthia, before erupting into a fit of coughs and more nausea, and his new pet brought him more food, because it had no idea what was wrong.

Then came the painful time when Vibe couldn't get up from where he was. He wasn't able to make it farther than the living room, before he collapsed, moaning in pain as he clutched his stomach. His beast caught his leather sleeve in its mouth, urgently trying to pull him away from the 'bad mothers' that were approaching.

The creature then began to act wildly, yipping and demanding that Vibe get up, and run, and come with him, but the only response it got was a series of coughs from a face that had almost turned green from malnutrition and hypothermia, and it howled loudly as the adult demogorgons broke through their enclosure and pushed past its small frame, swiping their giant, greedy claws at a very ill Vibe.

It ran away from the scene cowardly, and if demogorgons could cry, Cisco swore that this one would never stop sobbing.

The vibe ended. Back in its blue pipeline cell, the creature had moved up to the single pane of glass, and was expectantly watching Cisco. It placed a single hand on the glass between them. *Listen. More.*

Cisco swallowed a breath of air, and sat down in front of him. "You came looking for me, because you think I'm the other Vibe?"

At the lack of response from the creature, Cisco moved his hands as he sounded out the syllables. "Listen... to me... I'm... not... your...

mother."

The beast growled at him, before it snapped its jaws, startling Cisco as Dante's face appeared in his mind and forcing him to fall over.

*Dante.*

Months had passed in the Upside Down since the beast's "new mother" was killed. It looked for a new source of safety, still too young to fight on its own.

*Ci - co*, it had learned to "speak", as it forged its way through a dark and bleak world. Memories of the other Vibe stayed with him, and as were the creature's abilities, it "sent out" memories to lure its *Ci - co* back in.

*Ci - co. Return. Alive. Need you. Miss you.*

It combed through the city. It stayed and hunted for meager prey in Central Park. It slept in Cisco's apartment, and did what it needed to to survive - but it wasn't going to last long. Not if it didn't eat humans, like the other demogorgons did.

But this creature believed humans were friends. Not food.

It had never seen another human in its life, save for *Ci - co*, who had fed it morsels of raw meat, and let it sleep with its head on *Ci - co's* knee.

*Ci-co's back*, it realized in surprise, as the smell of a living human lingered nearby, a scent almost identical to his previous owner's.

*Ci-co! Ci-co!*

The demogorgon excitedly bounded through the streets, memories of Earth-19 Cisco Ramon resurfacing and resonating through the surrounding air. *Ci-co! You're here! Cin-ta returned you! You safe! Alive-*

And the creature found its previous owner - weeping on wet concrete, curled up into fetal position on the ground, his knees drawn to his chest and his head buried in his arms.

*Ci-co?*

Hot tears involuntarily streamed from Cisco's eyes as the demogorgon sniffed the strange man crying on the street, nudging him gently with his paw. *Ci-co...* it recognized. This man smelled like Cisco, and even looked like him - but this wasn't his owner.

Dante lifted his head, and faced the ugly faceless creature with his sad, grief-stricken eyes. "Cisco?" He asked softly, sniffing, "You - you know my brother?"

*Ci-co*, the creature replied, answering Dante with a swarm of memories of time it spent with Earth-19 Vibe.

Dante cautiously rose from where he was lying, and sat up. "That - that' not my brother," he explained, shaking his head, before sobs shook out of him, "I - I don't know where I am. I don't know how I got here-"

And Cisco watched in pain as Dante cried, lost in a world full of darkness with only a toothy carnivore for company.

That had been nine months ago.

The demogorgon showed Cisco more of its memories - memories of a now scrawny Dante with a sweaty and haggard face. He was camping in the dark by a riverbank outside the forest, and his clothes in scraps. The beast would pull Dante away when he reached for the orange fruit that grew out of the ground - fruit that had poisoned the other Vibe - and his brother was now living off of the flesh of slugs and smaller animals, and bugs. It was a horrible living and the river's water was spoiled - but it was enough to get by.

*Barely* enough to get by.

The creature laid its head on Dante's knees, as Dante sat on a fallen tree trunk. He softly caressed his hand over the beast's small leathery head. "Do you think my brother's going to come for me?"

*Ci-co?* the beast cooed in response.

"Yeah. Cisco. *My* Cisco... Do you think he thinks I'm dead?"

And Cisco snapped himself out of the vibe - and tightly shut his eyes, shaking his head and covering his face to dispel any remnants of his vision.

Dante was losing hope.

He thought Cisco wouldn't come back for him, when in reality -

"It's fake," Cisco decided stubbornly, shaking his head angrily as he broke out of the vibe, "You're showing me *fake* memories of Dante. Cynthia was right - you're doing this to get me to do your bidding before kill me. I can't believe you - Dante would never think I'd forget him-"

The creature behind the glass purposefully stared back at Cisco, instructing him to pay attention, and Cisco took a deep breath as he fell quiet and nodded his head in compliance, watching the rest of the animal's memory.

Dante was still petting the animal, and the smallest smile split across his lips. "It's a long shot. But if you do see Cisco, if you can find him, could you remind him something for me?"

What?

"Just... this."

And his vision turned and swelled, and in the pipeline, Cisco fell to his knees, as Dante's memory overtook him, and tears automatically spilled as he clenched his eyes shut.

No. No...

Cisco was eleven years old again.

He was small, and dressed in nothing but flip flops and a pair of orange and green swim trunks, and he was playing in the backyard pool with his brothers, the three tiny boys bouncing around in the water.

No. No, Cisco begged. *Not this. Not the pool, not the water-*

Dante and Armando laughed as they splashed water in each other's faces, throwing a beach ball between each other, and Cisco floated around them as he hung onto a pool noodle, smiling.

"Let's play a game!" Armando suggested excitedly, pointing up at the oak tree a few feet from the pool, before gesturing to the large branch above the pool that gave them shade.

"What kind of game?" Tiny Cisco asked curiously, squinting his eyes against the sun as he looked up at the thick branch.

"Momma said we can't climb the tree," Dante warned with a pout, holding the beach ball before he threw it at Armando's bare back.

Dante. Always the party pooper.

"Nonsense. It'll be okay," Armando assured confidently, ignoring the ball and grinning as he climbed out of the pool and ran to the tree, before he began climbing up the hollows in its trunk.

"Armando, that doesn't look okay," Dante warned again, and Cisco watched in eerie curiosity, impressed as Armando wormed his body all the way up to the branches, before he smirked at his younger brothers down below.

*The smirk...*

*The proud, happy smirk before he died was the worst part.*

"Armando, be careful!" Cisco voiced suddenly, as the branch began to shake.

"It's okay!" Armando yelled back, before gasping as the branch snapped completely free from the tree.

In the Pipeline, Cisco covered his face with his fists as the tears shook out of him. He felt cold and hollow. His brother had fallen onto the concrete, not the water, from ten feet up in the tree. It had been so sudden, and in the end, his fresh red blood twirled and made strange patterns as it mixed with the water in the pool, and his mother screamed as paramedics flooded the backyard, their father watching in fear.



Both Cisco and Dante were left sobbing as everyone moved out and loaded the once-smiling body onto an ambulance. Their parents left without a word. Cisco and Dante were alone, sitting beside each other, and Dante clutched his brother's small hand, their bodies trembling despite the summer heat.

Cisco kept weeping, mumbling prayers in Spanish, before Dante caught his shoulders and turned him, forcing him to look him in the eye. "Stop that," he ordered sharply, his jaw clenched.

"Armando-" Cisco wept.

"Armando will be alright," Dante promised, pulling his smaller brother into a crushing embrace, "They're taking him to the hospital. He'll be fine-"

But Cisco's eyes were trained on the bloody mess left in the backyard, amidst leaves. "But he's got hurt so badly-"

"And hurt goes away," Dante assured, holding his brother at arm's length. He kissed Cisco's forehead, and smiled encouragingly at him before he claimed: "Hurt goes away, right? Doesn't it do that? Remember when Tina punched Armando in class, and his arm was fractured? *That* didn't last. And when I got yelled at by Tia Marissa and she threw her shoe at me for breaking her vase? That didn't last either. There's no need to be scared. Armando's hurt right now, but he'll be okay again. He will be."

Cisco sniffled, and wiped away the tears from his eyes.

"And remember when you got lost at Suzy's birthday party, when we went laser tagging?" Dante brought up again, hopefully as he tipped Cisco's chin up, "You were scared. Because you couldn't go into the dark, because you didn't know what was there. But you found me-"

"I found you..." Cisco recalled with a small, amazed smile.

"Yeah, you did, Cisco," his brother answered, pulling him in for another hug, "You walked into the dark. You faced your fears. You ignored the mean kids who were shooting at you, and you found me..."

In the Pipeline, Cisco wiped his eyes as the final memory continued in his mind. It was one of those rare defining moments when Dante had worn his love for his younger brother on his sleeve. Looking back, Cisco knew Dante was just as scared as he was, just as worried for Armando, but the words he told Cisco were genuine, and full of love and protection.

This was no illusion.

There was no way a demon could conjure this memory...

Dante had led Cisco back inside, and unwrapped and gave him a small ice cream bar, smiling appreciatively at his younger brother and patting his wet head to comfort him. He wasn't much taller, or older, than Cisco, but he got down on one knee to look at his brother's face.

"There's isn't anything to be scared of, okay?" Dante pledged with an honest smile, as Cisco took a bite of ice cream, "You have Armando and me, and Armando's gonna be fine. Trust me. Brothers *always* stick together, and we *always* protect each other when we're lost or hurt - and I *know* for a fact that you and I will be okay if we stick together and look out for one another. It's a rule."

"We gotta stick together?"

Dante gently stroked his brother's cheek as he smiled, feeding him ice cream. "Yeah, always. It's a rule, Cisco."

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**Please leave a message with your thoughts on your way out. What did you think of this chapter? What do you think will happen next? :D**

**See you all again soon,**

**DBV**

**Author's Note:**

Hi! Thank you for reading! Please leave a review on your way out, or let me know what you think will

happen next!  
Until next time.  
- DBV